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ABSTRACT

The variation seen as deviation among the nonstandard styles of English does not represent a decay of the language, but rather, is necessary for simplification and other changes of English structure. The modern-day English pronominal system resulted from the incorporation of Scandinavian forms in the North and East Midland dialects of Middle English (ME). These were needed to disambiguate phonologically similar third person ME pronouns. As these new forms spread southward, they existed in variation with the older forms until they eventually replaced them. Thus, the presence of choices led to changes in the permanent system. Variation also accounted for the reduction of the redundant case system and of multiple negation. Today, the style of English that students are taught via prescriptive grammar differs from their informal oral style. While women most often control the standard, men adopt "ungrammatical" style as a sign of masculinity, and will lead the way in the changes this variation will effect. Some changes predicted are: (1) the disappearance of the pseudo-subjunctive in if-clauses, (2) the extension of the use of "that" to include nonrestrictive relative clauses, and (3) the use of the objective in subjective complements, producing "It is me." (PJM)

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THE ROLE OF STYLISTIC CHOICES IN LANGUAGE CHANGE*

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As teachers of English, most of us have grown accustomed to bearing the brunt of the blame for student illiteracy and the general decay of the English language. We have learned to keep still as journalists, commentators, and parents wag their forefingers at us, sagely intoning that "no one can write good English anymore." Teachers of composition have learned that it is futile to demand that such observations be clarified, because we have tired of hearing writing skills equated with (or reduced to) a student's ability to avoid errors in subject-verb agreement.

Within the profession, we have waged our own battles. Advocates of the students' right to their own language have seemingly been overwhelmed by those bearing the "Back to the Basics" standard, and the latter have sworn death to the fragment and the misplaced modifier. A trained historical linguist turned grammar teacher, I have observed the students themselves eagerly join the ranks, swearing fealty to Standard American English as they enroll in my course. Even a mercenary may have a sense of honor, however, and I therefore ask that you hear me out as I confess that I have no hope for my success.

To teach prescriptive grammar is to instill in our students the conviction that the use of written English is for those who are to the manner born. Like their elders, they regard correct usage with a public piety customarily reserved for patriarchal religion and motherhood. Among themselves, however--away from the watchful eyes of newspaper columnists and English instructors--they may be wont to remark that it is a custom more honour'd in the breach than in the observance.

When we teach our students formal Standard American English, we provide them with a second style of written communication, one which certainly departs from even our own modes of oral expression.[1] For many of our students, the discrepancy between their informal usage and that of formal English may be even greater.

Whorf (1956) recognized that any language might have "sex styles." The more recent work of sociolinguists, including Shuy, Wolfram and Riley (1967), Wolfram (1969), Labov (1966a) and Levine and Crockett (1966), has demonstrated that such "styles" exist in American English. They have found that women, allowing for other variables such as age, education, and social class, consistently use linguistic forms which are closer to the standard or prestige forms of the language. Thus, for instance, women in any given group use the -ing form of the present participle more frequently than do men in the same group, while men use the -in' form more frequently.[2]

As a result, sociolinguists have concluded, women--particularly middle-class women--lead the way in any linguistic change in the direction of the national norm, Standard English. Men, on the other hand, tend to adopt "ungrammatical" forms and working-class pronunciation. Labov (1966b: 108) has conjectured that informal working-class speech confers "covert prestige" because men perceive this speech pattern as more "masculine." Trudgill (1972) confirms that some male speakers of British English must be aiming at working-class forms, because they tend to under-report the frequency with which

they use standard pronunciation. In other words, they perceive their speech as less "correct" than it is, despite their overt observations on their "bad" linguistic behavior.

Such evidence suggests that middle-class men may lead in linguistic shifts initially perceived as "ungrammatical" by middle-class female speakers and upper-class speakers. Any change generalizing a non-standard form to other segments of the population may be a male innovation; any attempt, on the other hand, to establish prestige forms in their speech and in their writing may be resisted, since good grammar and standard pronunciation are marks of effeminacy.

The implications for those of us dedicated to the teaching of grammar and composition are obvious. When we instruct men and boys in "proper usage," the prestige forms to be used in written prose, we force them to adopt forms which are largely alien to their informal speech, and which must remain alien because the use of "grammatical" English may well be sex-role stereotyped for middle-class speakers. One of my colleagues, a male English professor from an upper-middle-class North Carolina family has confirmed that "using good grammar would have made us sissies" in his boyhood. Two of my male students with working-class origins have observed that their peers equated the adoption of prestige forms with social-climbing (as indeed it is); as one remarked, "They woulda said we were usin' language to try to be better than them."

The formal style which is required in college and in most high school writing is certainly a second style for most of us; for many of our students, however, it deviates markedly from

the style of speech characteristic of their sex and/or their social dialect.

I have just suggested that some linguistic change may result from the spread of a form or pronunciation from one social dialect to another. However, it is also true that new prestige dialects may arise as a result of the economic prominence of a particular region. Such was certainly the case in the adoption of the East Midlands dialect as the prestige dialect of England during the Middle English period. Once adopted, that prestige dialect, however, ceased to be local, and became standardized across England. Nonstandard dialects, on the other hand, tend to use forms and pronunciations limited to a particular region.

Hence, working-class and middle-class men who use nonstandard English preserve local dialects, while middle-class women tend to adopt the non-regional standard.

In an effort to quell elitist allegations that English is decaying or declining due to the growing "illiteracy" of our students (and consequently, the American population as a whole), I shall demonstrate how linguistic change may cause the adoption of a new standard form, relegating the older form to the category of nonstandard (or regional) variant. Since I shall be examining the historical development of the pronominal system of English, the discussion should prove of particular interest to feminist proponents of pronominal change, and to their adversaries as well.

During the Middle English period, our Modern English forms for the third-person plural pronouns (they, them, their) were recent borrowings. Apparently because the older forms of the pronoun had developed pronunciations identical to those for the masculine pronoun (he, him, his) in the North and East Midlands, these regions of England adopted the Scandinavian forms of the plural. This innovation then spread southward and into Standard English, replacing the native English forms, by means of internal borrowing. Today, forms which resemble our Old English paradigm--as, for example, -em in 'Put 'em up!'--are regarded as appropriate only in informal speech. Yet no one regards this shift in general usage as evidence of decay.

The same period witnessed the adoption of a new feminine nominative pronoun, beginning in sh-, apparently also due to the accidental homophony of the masculine and feminine forms after phonological change. Today, the Northumbrian ho is the nonstandard form, despite its historical conservatism. The relative fidelity of Northumbrian to Old English heo is not applauded; rather, the variant is regarded as quaint and faintly amusing by speakers of Standard English. Nor is there evidence of public outcry protesting the decay of pure English when the new forms of the pronoun were adopted in the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries.

The availability of Scandinavian forms to English speakers in areas heavily-settled by Scandinavians led to external borrowing; internal borrowing spread the new plural pronouns.

Two centuries of internal variation of the feminine pronoun forms resulted in the widespread adoption of the innovative form she. The heterogeneity of English--variations in English due to social and geographical factors--led to the presence of choices in the grammar, and the choices led to permanent change in the pronominal paradigm.[3]

The presence of variation in the grammar appears to be a necessary if not a sufficient condition for simplification in the grammatical rules of English--a form of change which has been operant in the history of our language for centuries. We are well aware that Old English was a highly synthetic language, with five noun cases, three grammatical genders, and various noun classes partially based on noun gender. Grammatical concord between nouns and their modifiers was obligatory; subject-verb agreement was more complex than it is in Modern English. A greater percentage of Old English verbs fell into one of the seven irregular verb classes.

While many of the nouns and verbs used most frequently in everyday speech have remained irregular, others have become regular, generalizing the patterns of -ed past tenses and -s plurals to other contexts and simplifying the grammar of English. The tendency of children to overgeneralize the grammatical patterns they learn is too well-known to require documentation; each of us has observed children produce variants like bringed and mouses. Yet when these same children enter adolescence, we expect them to cease regularizing their paradigms. I spend days each semester teaching irregular noun plurals and verb tenses, despite the fact that misusing data as a

singular or seen as a past tense will not, I know, impede the communication process.

Traugott (1972: 15) has observed that there "is about 70 percent redundancy in the sounds of an average utterance" in Modern English; hence, many elements may be deleted or altered without reducing the ability of a hearer to interpret its meaning. The historical simplification of the system of English case-marking has eliminated a great deal of redundant information from the grammar of English; yet I devote class time to instructing students in the use of the genitive case in constructions like "I appreciate your being so prompt" and the pseudo-subjunctive be in if-clauses contrary to fact ("If I were President, I'd reduce taxes.").

English has, of course, undergone some elaboration, increasing the complexity of the grammar in certain areas. Most elaboration appears to be the result of adult stylistic innovations which add rules to the grammar or restrict the use of a certain pattern, narrowing the contexts in which it can occur. The introduction of do as an obligatory tense carrier in questions and negatives lacking other auxiliary verbs was such an elaboration. Prior to the addition of a rule of do-support to the grammar of English, any verb might be fronted to form questions and any verb might be negated. As negation and question-formation were restricted in their operation to auxiliary verbs, do became a primary auxiliary. However, until the early eighteenth century, its use was optional in both questions and negative sentences; that is, do-support began as a stylistic variation.[4]

Through a similar process, the multiple negation required in Old English became optional by Chaucer's time, and is now considered nonstandard usage. The three examples below may illustrate the process of change. (1) is taken from the Parker Chronicle, written in the ninth and tenth centuries:

(1) ond þā cuaedon hīe þaet him nāēnig māēg lēofra nāēre þonne hiera hlāford, ond hīe nāēfre his banan folgian noldon.

'And then said they that to them no kinsman dearer was not than their lord, and they never his murderer follow would not.'

'And then they said that no kinsman was dearer to them than their lord, and they would never follow his murderer.'

(Parker, p. 48)[5]

(2), from the General Prologue to Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, illustrates that multiple negatives were still acceptable in the literary usage of the Middle English period:

(2) He nevere yet no vileyne ne sayde
In al his lyf unto no manere wight.

(ll. 70-71)

(3), on the other hand, from the twelfth century Peterborough Chronicle, demonstrates that negative subjects in Middle English might occasionally lack negated verbs:

(3) and swa mycel hearm þaer waes gedon swa nan man hit cuðe oðer secgen.

'and so much damage was done there that no man knew how to tell another of it'

(PB 1123, p. 253)[6]

Negative constructions like (3) remained rare stylistic options during the Middle English period. However, they have become Standard Modern English rule. Hence, while (4) is an "ungrammatical" translation of (3), so is (5):

(4) * 'and so much damage was done there than no man didn't know how to tell another of it'

(5) * 'and so much damage was done there that any man didn't know how to tell another of it'

Needless to say, when I tell my students that "double" negatives represent an error in adverbial usage, I fail to mention that they are using acceptable Old English grammar. Such an admission might imply that their nonstandard usage can be construed as historically "purer" than Standard Modern negation, if purity is equated with anachronism.

Instead I simply indicate that multiple negation is redundant, and therefore incorrect--uneasily awaiting the day a brighter- or bolder-than-average student argues that subject-verb agreement and case-marking are, in most instances, equally redundant.

The development of Modern English negation suggests that some syntactic changes may proceed by means of introducing a stylistic option and then eliminating the older variant, a two-step process which results in the replacement of one rule by another. However, the process may not occur in every variety of English. Thus, multiple negation is "still" obligatory in Black English, and is a stylistic variant in nonstandard white (working-class) English.

In attempting to inculcate in my students Standard Modern rules, I "teach" internal borrowing based on the elitist principle that white upper-class speech is better regardless of its historical invalidity. I teach my students how to "pass" in order to become upwardly mobile. To state that their peers will think better of them if they use "correct" grammar--prestige English--is to state that they will be more highly regarded if mistaken for a member of the upper classes or if understood to be imitating upper-class speakers, whose social dominance will then be both maintained and reinforced. (While speaking along these lines, I should like to observe that arguments based on the "purity of the language" and lamentations on its "contamination" remind me of nothing so much as discussions of racial miscegenation in the antebellum South and in the Germany of the Third Reich. A semantic comparison of the rhetoric used by advocates of racial and linguistic purity might prove extremely interesting.)

Though numerous students may enroll in prescriptive grammar classes as the "Back to the Basics" movement swells, I doubt that we English instructors will be able to prevent generalization and simplification in the grammar of English. Though no prophet, I predict the following changes will soon occur in formal Standard English; they are all evident already in nonstandard or in informal usage:

1. the disappearance of the pseudo-subjunctive in *if*-clauses;
2. the replacement of the past perfect by the conditional modal *would* in other *if*-clauses, so that *If I had seen him* is replaced by *If I would have seen him*, the form found in the *then*-clause at present;

3. the replacement of the genitive by the objective in noun clauses, so that I appreciate his being on time is replaced by I appreciate him being on time, freeing the genitive from its function as a subordinator;
4. the regularization of many foreign plurals, following the pattern of antenna, whose nonlearned plural is now antennas;
5. the reversal of the rule requiring use of the masculine pseudo-generic he/him/his to "agree with" indefinite or unknown antecedents like everyone, which are notional plurals;
6. the extension of the use of the relative pronoun that to include nonrestrictive relative clauses;
7. the increased "stranding" of prepositions in questions, concomitant with the loss of the objective case marker on interrogative pronouns, resulting in Who do you want to speak to?
8. the use of the objective in subjective complements, resulting in It is me.

As grammar teachers, we provide our students with one style, the style of formal written English. Other styles, more regular than this prestige style, provide them with other choices. And where there is choice, change is possible--and likely--if it will simplify the grammar, notwithstanding the injunctions of purists whose forefathers used the very double negative they purport to deplore.

Notes

[1] I shall use the term "style" to indicate variants which may be more or less freely chosen by native speakers. A "grammar" is, properly speaking, a system of rules learned by the speaker. Once "formal grammar" is understood to constitute a system of rules governing a formal style of usage--one which is correlated with both sex and social class--the debate over a student's right to his/her own language may be placed in its proper perspective.

[2] The term "sex style" is appropriate because it indicates the frequency with which a member of either sex uses a particular variant. Thus, he/she chooses one variant with greater or lesser frequency, but both variants are open to each sex. In addition, it is interesting to observe that gay men are able to adopt a "feminine" style for the purpose of in-group communication, a capacity which has been described in detail by Louis Crew of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. This is further evidence that "sex styles" are the result of gender signalling rather than of biological characteristics, and that they are freely chosen. Haas (1944) discusses sex styles in several languages. Bodine (1975) offers a more comprehensive overview.

[3] For a lengthier treatment of the evolution of the "feminine" nominative pronoun in English, see Stanley and Robbins (1978).

[4] I use the term <u>do</u>-support to describe a transformation which inserts <u>do</u> as an auxiliary in questions, negatives, and emphatics just in case no other auxiliary verb is present. Many transformational linguists prefer to assume that <u>do</u> is present in the

deep structures of all sentences, and that a rule of do-deletion applies whenever do immediately precedes a verbal (VB). While a rule inserting do seems intuitively satisfying to the native speaker of English, do-deletion is more easily formulated. See Traugott (1972: 197-99) for a sketch of the major uses of do and other English auxiliaries.

[5] Reference is to Plummer (1952).

[6] Reference is to Plummer (1952). For a more elaborate treatment of the development of English negation, see Jespersen (1961), vol. V; for a transformational account, see Robbins (1970) or Traugott (1972).

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